

Traditional Forms and Revolutionary Politics: The English Romantic Political Sonnet

MA by Dissertation Ignatius Zaaïjman (0605907A)

Abstract

The English Romantic political sonnet is characterised by a careful and often anxious exploration on the part of the poet of the revolutionary politics of the public world in which the Romantics lived in the late 1790's and early 1800's. When one looks at the effect that the French Revolution had on the politics of Europe, and further abroad, Russia and the United States, it becomes clear why Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats harboured feelings of anxiety and fear and why they chose to write about revolutionary politics using the comparatively safe form of the sonnet. The sonnet provided not only a safe traditional form for the poets of the age to express themselves during a time of widespread revolution, but also an old-worldly sense of order, formality and decorum in a time of meaningless bloodshed and terror. Despite the prevailing view that the Romantics were concerned with pulling down old forms and structures and remaking them, in the case of the political sonnet we see something contrary to this theory happening. The Romantics were concerned with remaking poetry and art, but the aftermath of the French Revolution seems to have been too shocking and terrifying to comprehend. It was too much, even in an age of excess. In a time of uncertainty and possible persecution, the Romantics retreated into a private world of fourteen ordered lines, while at the same time exploring relevant public issues. Wordsworth, for example, found a real sense of homeliness and "dwelling" in the form of the sonnet. As late as the early 1840's, he was still writing about the death penalty using the form of the sonnet, a topic with a close resemblance to the beheadings of the Revolution. Coleridge felt able to write a sequence of political sonnets praising or criticising the personalities that made up the social and political world of the 1790's. Shelley was merciless in his damnation of the King in "England in 1819", and Keats, who many still regard as an apolitical and dehistorised poet and writer, nevertheless included political themes in some of his sonnets as well. There is also enough evidence in Keats's letters of his knowledge of political matters. Even Byron, the most egotistical and revolutionary perhaps of all the Romantics, felt the need to include a political sonnet in one of his letters to his publisher. The English

Romantic political sonnet then represents the combination of the private and the public in the ordered, traditional and perhaps even outmoded form of the sonnet. Using the reasonable and astute example of Milton, the Romantics, led by Coleridge, resurrected the form of the sonnet and in particular the political sonnet and took it one step further than Milton. With the help of Pre-Romantics such as Bowles, the Romantics lyricised the Miltonic political sonnet, bringing the form in line with contemporary artistic ideals and theories of the expression of the individual's loves, fears, hopes and feelings. In an age of reckless abandon and cruelty, the English Romantic political sonnet offered its practitioners and readers some measure of order and safety, giving them the opportunity to write about pressing public matters and the effect these matters had on the private world of the poet's feelings.